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Book Review: Taking Action with Teacher Research by Meyers and Rust

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Book Review

Meyers, E., & Rust, F. (Eds). (2003). *Taking action with teacher research*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. 174 pages.

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This book is about the reality of schools and the forces that teachers, children, and their parents are up against in trying to make public education successful. This is a story of hope and hard work. (Meyers & Rust, 2003, p. xiii)

Introduction

The teaching profession is often referred to as a lonely travail. Adam Urbanski uses the following description: “Poverty, chastity, and obedience were the standards—much as in a convent” (Meyers & Rust, 2003, p.vi). He further states that often teachers make remarks like they enjoy teaching, but hate their jobs. This lack of professionalism on the part of teachers and having no say in policy issues are at the core of the action research movement. Urbanski states that a hallmark of any profession is that the professionals are trusted to lead without excessive supervision. Therefore, teachers as professionals should be allowed to make their own decisions about teaching. In 1998, the Teachers Network Policy Institute (TNPI) was founded with the goal of bridging this gulf between teaching and educational policies. Meyers and Rust say:

Our intent is to demonstrate how teachers in the course of their everyday teaching can make the case for school reform...These studies show how as a group of teachers, the TNPI Fellows have begun to draw their research to influence policy in the following domains: resources needed to meet standards, conditions of workplace, and the status of the teaching profession. (p.158)

Action research is a powerful tool—it not only sheds light on the complexities of the teaching process in day-to-day life, but it also is the best way to make the policymakers aware of the pitfalls of the irrelevant policies imposed upon teachers. Each and every teaching situation is unique and requires its own specific attention; therefore, the generic, formulized policies of “one size fits all” need to be reevaluated. This initiative taken by action research of the how, what, and why of teaching can eventually bring reform to the whole education system. Action research is a journey. It goes through a cycle of the following stages:

- Identify a problem to be studied;
- Develop a rationale;
- Review current research;
- Organize tools to collect data;

- Take action; and
- Analyze and make a case for policy implications.

The four most important components of each step in action research are:

- Reflection
- Dialogue with group members and others
- Project voice regarding what needs to be done
- Take informed action

Thus, the cycle continues back to reflection, and so on.

The Stories Speak

This book contains the stories of six Fellows from the TNPI—the bumps and obstacles they faced through their journey in bringing educational reform to their respective outfits. These are also the stories of their hope and triumph. Meyers and Rust say:

The stories we chose for this book are representative of the whole in that they draw attention to the complex and delicate interaction that is teaching and learning, and to the implicit link between teachers' actions, and student achievements. (p. xiv)

Our Unfinished Story: Rising to the Challenges of High Standards

Matt Wayne, a teacher in a Lower East Side middle school in New York City, confronts the problems of getting appropriate books for struggling eighth-grade students. He begins his research by asking, “How can we get the right books into the hands of struggling readers, so that they get excited about reading and attain the challenging reading standards?” (p.17). His story brings to light the inadequacies of school budgeting and the problems of bypassing teachers in the decision-making process.

The Early Literacy Club: Building Excellence Through Collaboration

Jane Chin Fung focuses on the conditions of schooling and the status of teachers in an elementary school in downtown Los Angeles. Her concern as a mentor teacher is that the teachers receive adequate support and are provided with professional development opportunities to help them become effective members of the teaching profession.

The Mother Tongue: The Role of Parent-Teacher Communication in Helping Students Reach New Standards

Lara Goldstone, teaching in New York City's Chinatown, focuses on obstacles to successful communication with the parents of her students. She develops strategies to communicate with non-English parents regarding language arts standards. She looks into the impact of parental understanding of the new standards on children's performance.

Time and Choice: A Winning Combination

Carol Tureski, a high school teacher in Queens, looks into the repercussions of a lack of access to relevant resources, poor conditions of the workplace, inflexible schedule, and low status of teachers as significant barriers to facilitating adolescent literacy.

Outcomes of Reduced Class Size in High School Math Classrooms

Natasha Warikoo of a Manhattan high school looks at the impact of class size on her teaching of second-language learners in her math class. She finds out that reduced class size directly impacts the quality of teaching. Her study has implications for policymakers on smaller class size, conditions of the work place, resources to meet standards, and professional development of teachers.

The Empire State Strikes Back: Portfolio Culture in the Regents Era

Janet Ruth Price, a high school teacher in Queens, develops an assessment process which demonstrates the whole picture of student progress. She finds out that a performance-based assessment system with clear guidelines leads to changes in teacher practices, and improves student performance as well.

Conclusion

Taking Action with Teacher Research, through the stories of the six Fellows of TNPI, broadens our understanding of day-to-day happenings in the school system, and shows how each and every situation is unique in its own way. It also shows that no “one size fits all” formula can solve teaching ills. Action research is powerful in bringing about educational improvements by promoting more engaged learners, and making teachers aware of their professional status. But, as the saying goes, “Nothing is achieved easily.” Action research too has its hurdles, but with persistence and patience, it will significantly impact policies for the betterment of the education system.

Action research is powerful in bringing about educational improvements by promoting more engaged learners, and making teachers aware of their professional status.

Meyers and Rust say:

The unique character of each of these studies provides insight about the complexity of teaching. Their individuality also helps to uncover some of the ways in which education policy intersects and shapes practice in classrooms and schools. (p. xv)

Ellen Meyers is a Founder and Senior Vice President of the Teachers Network, a nonprofit organization. She is also the Director of the TNPI. Frances O’Connell Rust is an advisor to the TNPI, and a Professor of Teacher Education in the Department of Teaching and Learning at Steinhardt School of Education, New York University. *Taking Action with Teacher Research* is a must read for all educators and policymakers, and as Meyers and Rust say,

“...Our best hope for school reform will come from the hard work of teachers like these TNPI Fellows. It is through sharing true stories of practice, supported by data, that teachers’ voices will become part of the policy discussion...This is a start.” (p.160)

Meenakshi Mohan has taught in several universities including Roosevelt University in Chicago, IL, National Louis University in Chicago, IL, Wheelock College in Boston, MA, and most recently Towson University in Towson, MD. She authored a children's book, The Gift (2014), and edited Tamam Shud: Poems of Kshitij Mohan in English and Hindi (2010). Her articles are published regularly in various journals, including Confluence UK. Some of her paintings are in private collections.

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